

The myth of Er

From Plato's Republic, Book X

Plato's *Republic* is a dialogue which examines the nature and course of justice in human affairs: in particular, Socrates wishes to consider the soul and its faculties in relation to justice. What is the state of a person who acts justly, and what that of a person who acts unjustly? Because of the difficulty in examining the soul and its ways (Socrates says it's too small and too close to us to see it clearly) the discussion switches to the state of a republic which acts justly and unjustly, because this can be seen as a more easily examined parallel – the republic and its various classes of citizens representing the soul and its various powers and faculties. Does the leading of a just life lead towards goodness? It seems that it does: but is this an intrinsic goodness, or merely good because justice leads to later rewards and injustice towards subsequent punishment? Socrates claims that acting justly is its own reward, and in the first nine and a half books of the work, Plato is especially concerned to show that this is the case. It is really only in the last half of the last book (the tenth), that he allows himself to consider what the consequences are of living a just or unjust life to the soul after the death of its mortal body. This last section is presented as a story of Er, who Socrates says was able to observe all that happens to souls on their release from the body, right the way through to the soul taking up residency again in a further body. (Plato was deeply embedded in the Orphic-Pythagorean teachings which saw the soul as passing from one incarnation to another, in much the same way as major Eastern teachings understand the human journey from life to life.) The following is Socrates' story of Er told to Glauco and his other gathered friends, together with his minimal comments upon the import of the story – it can, of course, be taken to be a symbolic representation of experience of the soul in an incarnating sequence of lives, but it can also be taken as an even more abstract symbol of how a single life moves from moment to moment, its internal condition responding to its thoughts and acts – *as such the tale of Er is as much a myth of life as it is of a possible afterlife.*

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Er, happening on a time to die in battle, when the dead were on the tenth day carried off, already corrupted, he was taken up sound; and being carried home, as he was about to be buried on the twelfth day, when laid on the funeral pile, he revived; and being revived, he told what he saw in the other state, and said: That after his soul left the body, it went with many others, and that they came to a certain daemoniacal place,¹ where there were two chasms in the earth, near to each other, and two other openings in the heavens opposite to them, and that the judges sat between these. That when they gave judgement, they commanded the just to go to the right hand, and upwards through the heaven, fixing before them the accounts of the judgement pronounced; but the unjust they commanded to the left, and downwards, and these likewise had behind them the accounts of all they had done.

But on his coming before the judges, they said, it behoved him to be a messenger to men concerning things there, and they commanded him to hear, and to contemplate everything in the place.

And that he saw here, through two openings, one of the heaven, and one of the earth, the souls departing, after they were there judged; and through the other two openings he saw, rising through the one out of the earth, souls full of squalidness and dust; and through the other, he saw other souls descending pure from heaven; and that always on their arrival they seemed as if they came from a long journey, and that they gladly went to rest themselves in the meadow, as in a public assembly, and saluted one another, such as were acquainted, and that those who rose out of the earth asked the others concerning the things above, and those from heaven asked them concerning the things below, and that they told one another: those wailing and weeping whilst they called to mind, what and how many things they suffered and saw in their journey under the earth; (for it was a journey of a thousand years) and that these again from heaven explained their enjoyments, and spectacles of immense beauty.

To narrate many of them, Glauco, would take much time; but this, he said, was the sum, that whatever unjust actions any had committed, and how many soever any one had injured, they were punished for all these separately

¹ Daemons, according to ancient traditions, are those creatures who regulate the workings of the cosmos, acting in accordance with divine laws. We should note that all daemons are essentially good – and that any reputation for being evil is a misunderstanding of their nature and their activities: we should no more think of a daemon as evil than we do of a doctor who, in attempting to bring about the cure of a disease, sometimes causes us to feel pain.

tenfold, and that it was in each, according to the rate of a hundred years, the life of man being considered as so long, that they might suffer tenfold punishment for the injustice they had done. So that if any had been the cause of many deaths, either by betraying cities or armies, or bringing men into slavery, or being confederates in any other wickedness, for each of all these they reaped tenfold sufferings; and if, again, they had benefited any by good deeds, and had been just and holy, they were rewarded according to their deserts.

Of those who died very young, and lived but a little time, he told what was not worth relating in respect of other things.

But of impiety and piety towards the Gods and parents, and of suicide, he told the more remarkable retributions. For he said he was present when one was asked by another, where the great Aridaeus was? This Aridaeus had been tyrant in a certain city of Pamphylia a thousand years before that time, and had killed his aged father, and his elder brother, and had done many other unhallowed deeds, as it was reported: and he said, the one who was asked, replied: He neither comes, said he, nor ever will come hither.² For we then surely saw this likewise among other dreadful spectacles: When we were near the mouth of the opening, and were about to ascend after having suffered everything else, we beheld both him on a sudden, and others likewise, most of whom were tyrants, and some private persons who had committed great iniquity, whom, when they imagined they were to ascend, the mouth of the opening did not admit, but bellowed when any of those who were so polluted with wickedness, or who had not been sufficiently punished, attempted to ascend. And then, said he, fierce men, and fiery to the view,³ standing by, and

² There are passages, like this one, in Plato which suggest that the worst offenders amongst humankind have a never-ending punishment in the lower reaches of the universe (Tartarus). But since Plato sees punishments delivered by the workings of the universe as a cure of the maladies of injustice *leading to the health of the patient*, we must understand these passages as indicating the unusually long periods required for the expunging of deeply-rooted evils in the soul – unless we are to postulate that the power of the whole of divine reality is unable to bring about the restitution of particular souls, which is to imply that a small part of the universe is stronger than the whole and its producer. Elsewhere Plato talks about 'great cycles of life' encompassing many terrestrial rounds of life – each of these cycles is a 'period' and many ancient Platonists suggested that an extremely unjust life would require one entire period for a soul to be freed from its effects.

³ By these, daemons of a punishing characteristic are signified – but again, we should note that elsewhere (in the *Gorgias*), Plato makes it clear that all proper punishment is undertaken *solely* with a view to the good of he who receives it – purging the poison of injustice from the soul of the wrong-doer.

understanding the bellowing, took them and led them apart, Aridaeus and the rest, binding their hands and their feet, and, thrusting down their head, and pulling off their skin, dragged them to an outer road, tearing them on thorns; declaring always to those who passed by, on what accounts they suffered these things, and that they were carrying them to be thrown into Tartarus. And hence, he said, that amidst all their various terrors, this terror surpassed, lest the mouth should bellow, and that when it was silent every one most gladly ascended. And that the punishments and torments were such as these, and their rewards were the reverse of these.

He also added, that every one, after they had been seven days in the meadow, arising thence, it was requisite for them to depart on the eighth day, and arrive at another place on the fourth day after, whence they perceived from above through the whole heaven and earth, a light extended as a pillar, mostly resembling the rainbow, but more splendid and pure; at which they arrived in one day's journey and thence they perceived. . .

(Here Er describes in detail the pillar of light which acted as a spindle, and also the nature of the eight wheels which were seen spinning around the spindle, ending ". . . on each of its circles there was seated a Siren on the upper side, carried round, and uttering one voice variegated by diverse modulations. But that the whole of them, being eight, composed one harmony.")

That there were three others sitting round at equal distance one from another, each on a throne, the daughters of Necessity, the Fates, in white vestments, and having crowns on their heads; Lachesis, and Clotho, and Atropos, singing to the harmony of the Sirens; Lachesis singing the past, Clotho the present, and Atropos the future. And that Clotho, at certain intervals, with her right hand laid hold of the spindle, and along with her mother turned about the outer circle. And Atropos, in like manner, turned the inner ones with her left hand. And that Lachesis touched both of these, severally, with either hand. After the souls arrive here, it is necessary for them to go directly to Lachesis.

That then a certain prophet first of all ranges them in order, and afterwards taking the lots, and the models of lives, from the knees of Lachesis, and ascending a lofty tribunal, he says:- The speech of the virgin Lachesis, the daughter of Necessity:

Souls of a day! The beginning of another period of men of mortal race.

The daemon shall not receive you as his lot, but you shall choose the

daemon:⁴ He who draws the first, let him first make choice of a life, to which he must of necessity adhere: Virtue is independent, which every one shall partake of, more or less, according as he honours or dishonours her: the cause is in him who makes the choice, and God is blameless.

That when he had said these things, he threw on all of them the lots, and that each took up the one which fell beside him, and that he was allowed to take no other. And that when he had taken it, he knew what number he had drawn. That after this, he placed on the ground before them the models of lives, many more than those we see at present. And that they were all-various. For there were lives of all sorts of animals, and human lives of every kind. And that among these there were tyrannies also, some of them long-lasting, and others destroyed in the midst of their greatness, and ending in poverty, banishment, and want. That there were also lives of renowned men, some for their appearance as to beauty, strength, and agility; and others for their descent, and the virtues of their ancestors. There were the lives of renowned women in the same manner. But that there was no disposition of soul among these models, because of necessity, on choosing a different life, it becomes different itself. As to other things, riches and poverty, sickness and health, they were mixed with one another, and some were in a middle station between these.

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There then, as appears, friend Glauco, is the whole danger of man. And hence this of all things is most to be studied, in what manner every one of us, omitting other disciplines, shall become an inquirer and learner in this study, if, by any means, he be able to learn and find out who will make him expert and intelligent to discern a good life, and a bad; and to choose everywhere, and at all times, the best of what is possible, considering all the things now mentioned, both compounded and separated from one another, what they are with respect to the virtue of life. And to understand what good or evil beauty operates when mixed with poverty, or riches, and with this or the other habit of soul; and what is effected by noble and ignoble descent, by privacy, and by public station, by strength and weakness, docility and indocility, and every thing else of the kind which naturally pertains to the soul, and likewise of what is acquired, when blended one with another; so as to be able from all

⁴ The Platonic tradition holds that each person has a daemon which acts as a guide through life – we see here, however, that the choice of life the soul makes before birth includes within it a choice of daemon, and therefore the free will of the human soul is not compromised by the guiding daemon.

these things to compute, and, *having an eye to the nature of the soul, to comprehend both the worse and the better life, pronouncing that to be the worse which shall lead the soul to become more unjust, and that to be the better life which shall lead it to become more just, and to dismiss every other consideration.* For we have seen, that in life, and in death, this is the best choice. But it is necessary that a man should have this opinion firm as an adamant in him, when he departs to Hades, that there also he may be unmoved by riches, or any such evils, and may not, falling into tyrannies, and other such practices, do many and incurable mischiefs, and himself suffer still greater: but may know how to choose always the middle life, as to these things, and to shun the extremes on either hand, both in this life as far as is possible, and in the whole of hereafter. For thus man becomes most happy. –

That then the messenger from the other world further told, how that the prophet spoke thus: Even to him who comes last, choosing with judgment, and living consistently, there is prepared a desirable life; not bad. Let neither him who is first be negligent in his choice, nor let him who is last despair. He said, that when the prophet had spoken these things, the first who drew a lot ran instantly and chose the greatest tyranny, but through folly and insatiableness had not sufficiently examined all things on making his choice, but was ignorant that in this life there was this destiny, the devouring of his own children, and other evils; and that afterwards, when he had considered it at leisure he wailed and lamented his choice, not having observed the admonitions of the prophet above mentioned. For that he did not accuse himself, as the author of his misfortunes, but fortune and the daemons, and everything instead of himself.

He added, that he was one of those who came from heaven, who had in his former life lived in a regulated republic, and had been virtuous by custom without philosophy. And that, in short, among these there were not a few who came from heaven, as being unexercised in trials.

But that the most of those who came from earth, as they had endured hardships themselves, and had seen others in hardships, did not precipitantly make their choice. And hence, and through the fortune of the lot, to most souls there was an exchange of good and evil things. Since, if one should always, whenever he comes into this life, soundly philosophize, and the lot of election should not fall on him the very last, it would seem, from what has been told us from thence, that he shall be happy not only here, but when he

goes hence, and his journey hither back again shall not be earthy, and rugged, but smooth and heavenly.

This spectacle, he said, was worthy to behold, in what manner the several souls made choice of their lives. For it was pitiful and ridiculous and wonderful to behold, as each for the most part chose according to the habit of their former life.

(Here Er tells of several famous characters who chose lives very much influenced by their previous lives, ending with that of Odysseus -)

And that by chance he saw the soul of Odysseus, who had drawn its lot last of all, going to make its choice: that in remembrance of its former toils, and tired of ambition, it went about a long time seeking the life of a private man of no business, and with difficulty found it lying somewhere, neglected by the rest. And that on seeing this life, it said, that it would have made the same choice even if it had obtained the first lot, - and joyfully chose it. That in like manner the souls of wild beasts went into men, and men again into beasts: the unjust changing into wild beasts, and the just into tame; and that they were blended by all sorts of mixtures.⁵

After therefore all the souls had chosen their lives according as they drew their lots, they all went in order to Lachesis, and that she gave to everyone the daemon he chose, and sent him along with him to be the guardian of his life, and the accomplisher of what he had chosen. - That first of all he conducts the soul to Clotho, to ratify under her hand, and by the whirl of the vortex of her spindle, the destiny it had chosen by lot: and after being with her, he leads it back again to the spinning of Atropos, who makes the destinies irreversible. And that from hence they proceed directly under the throne of Necessity; and that after he had passed by it, as all the others passed, they all of them marched into the plain of Lethe amidst dreadful heat and scorching, for he said that it is void of trees and everything that the earth produces.⁶

⁵ Ancient commentators on Plato suggest that the exchange of lives from men to beasts and beasts to men by the soul should be read symbolically – that a human life can be more or less animal-like, if that is what is freely-willed by the soul.

⁶ Thomas Taylor, the translator, notes that "by *Lethe* we must understand the whole of a visible nature, or, in other words, the realms of generation, which contain, according to Empedocles, oblivion . . . for souls that by a connection with body souls pass into extreme negligence; and there fall asleep. But when he says that no vessel contains the water of Amelete, this signifies that nothing can restrain the ever-flowing nature of body. Souls therefore being laid asleep in this body, at midnight fall to the earth; *i.e.* when they enter into a terrene body they become involved in profound night."

That when night came on, they encamped beside the river Amelete, whose water no vessel contains. Of this water all of them must necessarily drink a certain measure, and such of them as are not preserved by prudence drink more than the measure, and that he who drinks always forgets everything. But after they were laid asleep, and it became midnight, there was thunder, and an earthquake, and they were thence on a sudden carried upwards, some one way, and some another, approaching to generation like stars. But that he himself was forbidden to drink of the water. Where, however, and in what manner, he came into his body, he was entirely ignorant; but suddenly looking up in the morning, he saw himself already laid on the funeral pile. And this fable, Glauco, hath been preserved, and is not lost, and it may preserve us, if we are persuaded by it; for thus we shall happily pass over the river Lethe, and shall not contaminate the soul.

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But if the company will be persuaded by me; considering the soul to be immortal, and able to bear all evil, and all good, we shall always persevere in the road which leads above; and shall by all means pursue justice in conjunction with prudence, in order that we may be friends both to ourselves, and to the Gods, both whilst we remain here, and when we receive its rewards, like victors assembled together; and we shall, both here, and in that journey of a thousand years which we have described, enjoy a happy life.

